



OFFICE *of the* ATTORNEY GENERAL
GREG ABBOTT

May 27, 2003

Ms. Moira Parro
Assistant District Attorney
District Attorney's Office
Dallas County
411 Elm Street, Suite 500
Dallas, Texas 75202-3384

OR2003-3533

Dear Ms. Parro:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 181643.

Dallas County (the "county") received a request for eleven categories of information concerning a specified period of time and pertaining to a contract to collect court fines and fees. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure pursuant to sections 552.101, 552.103, 552.104, 552.107, 552.110 and 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered your claimed exceptions to disclosure.

We note that section 552.301(e) of the Government Code requires that a governmental body that requests an attorney general decision under section 552.301(a) must, within a reasonable time, but not later than the fifteenth business day after the date of receiving the written request, submit to the attorney general, among other items, written comments stating the reasons why any exceptions to disclosure apply that would allow requested information to be withheld from disclosure and a copy of the specific information requested, or representative samples of it if a voluminous amount was requested, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the copy. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(e). To date, the county has not submitted either of these two items to us for review. Thus, we find that the county has failed to comply with section 552.301 of the Government Code in requesting this decision from us.

Because the county failed to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 with regard to the requested information, the information is now presumed public. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302; *see also* *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379 (Tex. App.--Austin 1990, no writ); *City of Houston v. Houston Chronicle Publ'g Co.*, 673 S.W.2d 316, 323 (Tex. App.--Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, no writ); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). The county must demonstrate a compelling interest in order to overcome the presumption that the requested information is now public. *See id.* Normally, a compelling interest is demonstrated when some other source of law makes the requested information confidential or when third party interests are at stake. *See* Open Records Decision No. 150 at 2 (1977). Although the county claims that the requested information is excepted from disclosure pursuant to sections 552.103, 552.104, 552.107, and 552.111, we note that these exceptions to disclosure are discretionary exceptions to disclosure under the Public Information Act (the "Act") that do not constitute compelling interests that are sufficient to overcome the presumption that the requested information is now public.¹ Accordingly, we conclude that the county may not withhold any portion of the requested information under sections 552.103, 552.104, 552.107, or 552.111 of the Government Code. Furthermore, although the county claims that the requested information is excepted from disclosure pursuant to sections 552.101 and 552.110, we have no basis for concluding that it is so excepted under these exceptions to disclosure because the county failed to submit any portion of the requested information to us for our review. Furthermore, we have no indication from the county that it notified any interested third party of the request for information pursuant to section 552.305 of the Government Code. *See* Gov't Code § 552.305(d); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 542 (1990) (determining that statutory predecessor to section 552.305 permits governmental body to rely on interested third party to raise and explain applicability of exception to disclosure under Act in certain circumstances). Accordingly, we conclude that the county may also not withhold any portion of the requested information under sections 552.101 or 552.110 of the Government Code. Consequently, the county must release the entirety of the requested information to the requestor.

However, we caution the county that section 552.352 of the Government Code imposes criminal penalties for the release of confidential information. *See* Gov't Code § 552.352. Prior to releasing the information at issue, the county should ensure that it does not contain any such confidential information. If the county believes that any portion of the requested

¹ Discretionary exceptions are intended to protect only the interests of the governmental body, as distinct from exceptions which are intended to protect information deemed confidential by law or the interests of third parties. *See, e.g.,* Open Records Decision Nos. 630 at 4 (1994) (governmental body may waive attorney-client privilege, section 552.107(1)), 551 (1990) (statutory predecessor to section 552.103 serves only to protect governmental body's position in litigation and does not itself make information confidential), 473 (1987) (governmental body may waive section 552.111), 522 at 4 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general); *see also* *Dallas Area Rapid Transit v. Dallas Morning News*, 4 S.W.3d 469, 475-76 (Tex. App.--Dallas 1999, no pet.) (governmental body may waive section 552.103). Discretionary exceptions, therefore, do not constitute "other law" that makes information confidential.

information is indeed confidential and may not lawfully be released, it must challenge this ruling in court as outlined below.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

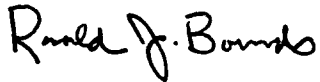
If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512) 475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this

ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ronald J. Bounds". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ronald J. Bounds
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RJB/lmt

Ref: ID# 181643

cc: Mr. Rand J. Riklin
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